

November 2, 2014 Joshua 3:7-17 Matthew 23:1-12 "Faithful Steps"

Today's reading from the Book of Joshua shows how God continued taking care of the Hebrew people even after Moses' death. As they started to cross the Jordan to enter the land promised to them, the waters stopped, and they were able to walk across the river with dry feet. In this occurrence, they learned that God could work through Joshua just as he had through Moses; and this new generation (remember - the older generation had died there in the wilderness during the forty years they had had to wander after their faithlessness) discovered that God was not limited to the wilderness, or to any one place. So the people began the entry into the Land long promised them, trusting in the presence and power of God. (pause)

The gospel lesson is related to this, though it may take a bit of doing to see how. In today's lesson Jesus criticized the religious authorities who sought to make themselves look good in the public eye. Then he counseled his hearers not to exalt themselves, but instead to proceed through life humbly, so that God might exalt them. To live this way is to live trusting God. One who does not trust God's faithfulness scrambles to provide meaning/position/success for himself or herself. One who is able to trust God scrambles only to do what Jesus said was most important: to love God and to love others. One kind of person takes steps to make a name for him/herself; the other takes steps, sometimes difficult ones, to be faithful to God. Too bad so many of our politicians seem to have forgotten this!

As I was growing up in church, I heard lots of stories about Moses and Abraham and David and Paul. I *didn't* hear much about anybody in modern days experiencing God. Unfortunately, this tends to be the norm in the modern-day main line churches. I say unfortunately, because the implication is that God worked among people back then, but not anymore.

A man once questioned his pastor: "Was it only back in Bible times that God acted? I don't feel God and I can't see God. My cancer progresses, in spite of my prayers. God doesn't seem to make much difference, at least for my life." Someone else: "My son makes all the wrong choices, and my prayers for him don't seem to change a thing." Another: "How could God let my husband do this to me, when I have tried to live a good life and play by the rules?"

We've all heard and perhaps said similar things. Remember: the people of Moses and Joshua's day were fretting over not having enough to eat, over how they would ever be able to take possession of the land God had promised them. *They also* found it hard to trust God, even though they had the story of the deliverance out of Egypt, even though they had been given the Ten Commandments and many teachings through Moses... "Is God really here? Is God really able? Is God even interested in MY LIFE?"

These days lots of people seem to gallop through life as though God is not supposed to make much difference. There seems to be an equation in this: If I am largely indifferent about God, then God cannot make much difference in my life. If I am into my own thing, wanting my own ways, using my religion only to make myself feel a little better about my life or as "death

insurance," then I am giving God very little power in my life. ...

When I was a pastor in Great Neck, NY, a reading of the book of Ecclesiastes prompted a study group to deal with some of the discouraging aspects of human life, including war and pollution, and we ended up talking about the freedom God has given us to choose not to honor him. Only by letting us have freedom not to love God and not to love our neighbors can God give us the opportunity to choose to love. We don't have to. But every time we do not love, we close ourselves off from life a little bit more. When we trust God enough to do something to honor him or to show love to somebody in need, we open ourselves a bit more to the life God wants to give us.

A few years ago I heard a young man criticizing other kids and boasting terribly about himself. He bragged about this and he bragged about that, and some of the youth around him complained that he seemed to be a terrible snob, always putting everybody else down and himself up so high. But then I learned more about this young man. His mother was continually in and out of the hospital with an unrelenting and life-threatening disease; his alcoholic father was out of the picture, removed by divorce; his stepfather, also alcoholic, had moved back into the house after being separated from the boy's mother, just so he could try to feed the boy during his mother's absence. No wonder this boy needed to brag! His situation was uncertain and frightening at best. He tried to give himself some kind of ground upon which to stand, at the expense of others, ultimately to his own detriment as he lost friends.

In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and other religious authorities weren't so different. They probably felt unsure about whether God was truly present for them. They'd been waiting for God to do something year after year, as the occupying Romans remained in power and they were forced to make continual compromises. They held tightly to their traditions and to the scriptures, but they had lost their sense of God being powerfully in their midst. For them, the stories of Joshua and Moses and Elijah and Jeremiah probably seemed less and less gripping as their own lives became flatter and flatter. Form took the place of substance as they clung tightly to their own systems, trying to fend off their sense of emptiness and hopelessness.

They couldn't see anything, but in fact, just when they were the most blind, God was delivering the most on his promise: his Son, Jesus, was offering his life for their sake. (Pause)

One day when we lived in Southington, I saw a neighborhood boy in our church entryway, smoking the butts left in a receptacle by members of AA. He was only about twelve, and I told him, as I had done many times, to stop smoking. He replied that he hated to smoke, but that he could not quit. I asked him if he attended church, and he said that he did, once a month. I wanted to know where, but instead I said, "Why don't you ask God to help you quit smoking?" He looked at me in surprise, and asked, "How could God do that?" I was surprised that this young man would think that God was unable to help him... Unwilling, maybe, but unable? I stammered, "God made you. God made your lungs, your hands...God can help you to stop hurting yourself if you will ask him to help."

Later, I felt like a full-of-wind Pharisee. I worried that maybe I had been too glib, too preacher-ish. I committed myself to praying, to ask God to help this boy. But I agonized over this. What if I had promised the boy more than God was willing to do? I cannot tell you that the boy stopped smoking or that his life ever turned out to be okay. The only thing I know is that when his parents split, he came to me and begged me to take his dog, which neither parent would take. So we acquired Sparky and had him for several years. The boy and his mother moved away and I later read that he was arrested for dealing drugs. So there's nothing to brag about on my part.

So here's the question: Does God work today? Is God here for each one of us, hoping that we will ease up on our frenetic striving to get through life or our careless indifference and be still, so that we can discover that God really is our God? I believe so! Our faith, the doctrine of all Christian churches, is based on the belief that the Spirit of Christ is present in each one of us, yearning for us to let his love flow through our lives into someone else's. "Humble yourselves, and he will lift you up." Here the faith lesson is almost a physics lesson: Water is stagnant if it sits, fresh if it flows...In faith we provide outlets for Christ's love by reaching out, and in the process our own selves are refreshed and refilled...

That's where "saints" come in. We don't call people "saints" just because they have died. Saints are ordinary persons whose lives have served to focus the light of God's love for us in such a way that we almost find it possible for us to believe that God loves us. They are persons who have let God's love shine through their days for someone else.

We all want to get through life with our feet dry, as unscathed as possible; and we'd all like to have remarkable proof that God is with us. This happened for the Hebrew people, but only as they struggled mightily to receive God's presence in their midst. Only as they stepped out in faith and put their feet in the water were they able to discover that their feet remained dry.

It's the same for us. Only as we step out in faith and risk reaching out to someone we may not even LIKE or someone we may fear, because God has asked us to love other people, can we discover that God really is watching over us.

Ps. 91 says, "God will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand." May the truth of this promise sustain our lives and direct our living, so that in all things we may give glory to God. Amen.